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AUTHOR Dietrich, Jane Ellen Kreitz
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the field experience of 30 undergraduate students in a teacher education program at the University of North Dakota. As part of an introductory teaching and learning course, teacher education students prepared for and taught elementary students in a small, rural school for one-day. The school enrolled 80 children in kindergarten through 4th grade and a combined class of 5th and 6th grades. There were six teachers and a principal who taught in the afternoon in the combined 5th and 6th grade class. Prior to the field experience, college students collaborated with classroom teachers in preparing the schedule for the day and developing learning activities on environmental themes. Students were required to write lesson plans for each learning activity and were encouraged to try out a variety of teaching methods including cooperative learning, learning centers, active learning, interactive techniques, and interdisciplinary methods. Students' narratives and papers about their field experience indicated they gained insight into the complexity of teaching; related their success and confidence to being prepared; realized the importance of planning but understood necessary adaptations to circumstances; and gained knowledge and experience in interacting with children. This field experience introduced beginning teacher education students to the complexity of teaching and to the roles of teachers and students in this process. (LP)

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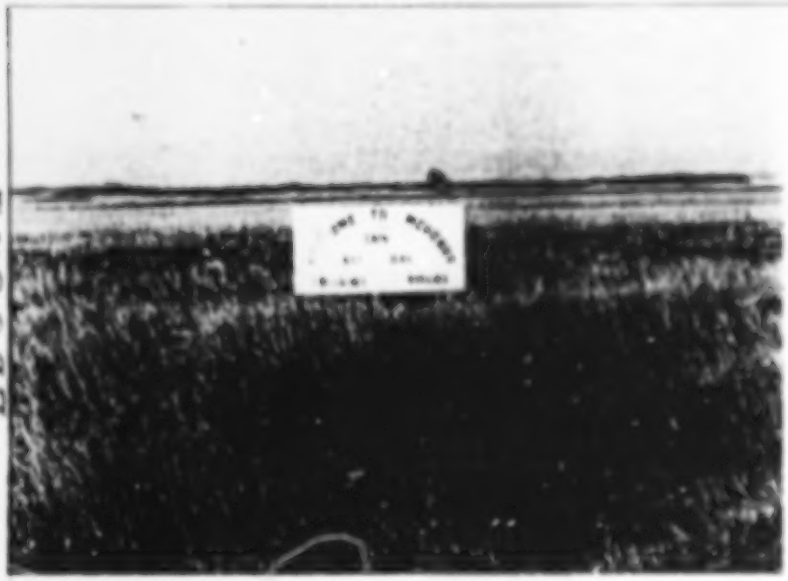

CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
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Jane Ellen Kreitz Dietrich

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A Day in the Life of a Rural School

by

Jane Ellen Kreitz Dietrich

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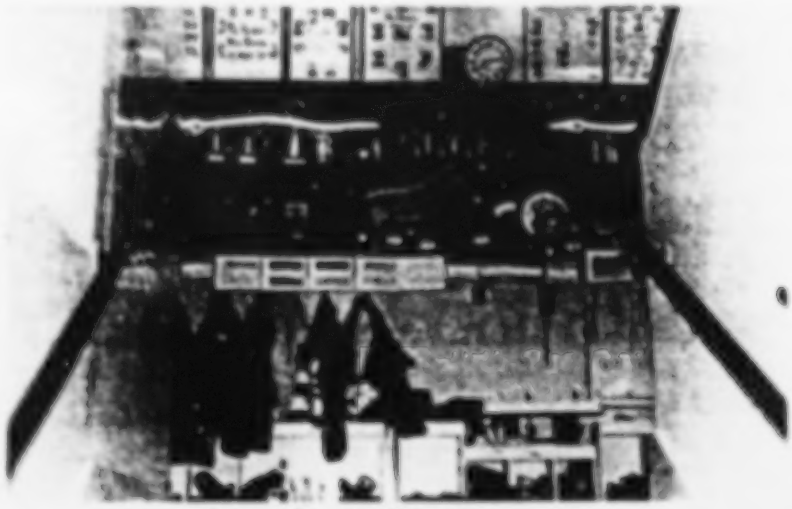
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A RURAL SCHOOL

By Jane Ellen Kreitz Dietrich
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND

"Once upon a time a group of University of North Dakota students went to McHenry, North Dakota. They left at the crack of dawn to get to that isolated town, somewhere in the heart of the state. I gasped for a breath of air when we arrived. We were finally there. I knew that the day ahead would be none like I had experienced before."

— R. H., April 29, 1991

Since September 1990, I have had the privilege of working in rural schools in North Dakota through my involvement in the Prairie Teachers Project sponsored by the Bush Foundation of St. Paul. The project was created to support first year teachers in rural schools. As a school facilitator, I was assigned to the elementary school in McHenry, North Dakota, one of eight rural schools in the project.



Looking Up The Stairwell

Besides my job as a facilitator for Prairie Teachers, I teach the Introduction to Teaching and Learning course at the University of North Dakota. In this class I help prospective undergraduates become aware of the knowledge, skills, and understandings that underlie teaching and learning. To assist the students in exploring the teaching world, I provide them

with a variety of learning experiences that include readings, peer teaching, individual projects, cooperative group projects, observations, interviews, journaling, materials collections, discussions, and peer and self-evaluation. However, I believe one of the best ways to introduce students to the teacher's and children's role in the school is for them to actually participate in a structured and reflective field experience.

Through the field experience students learn about the complexity of teaching—as Madeline Hunter states, "teaching is a stream of consciousness." They learn that teaching is self-awareness, researching, thinking about children, anticipating and planning, adapting, and evaluating. University students need to be empowered in order to learn. If empowered, they begin to show empathy for teachers and begin to be attentive to the central role children have in the teaching learning process.

In order for first year teachers to be acculturated into schools successfully, they need to be aware of and learn to negotiate the complexity of school culture by participating in structured and reflective experiences in which they gradually become empowered as they progress through their teacher education training program. Having to be responsible for and participating in the teaching process provides a vivid experience base for later thinking and reflection. Entering on the unfamiliar makes students aware of nuances of the culture of schools. Recognizing school culture and learning to modify it without giving away their own beliefs and values about teaching is important to their eventual success as teachers.

Making Connections

From my connection as facilitator for Prairie Teachers and instructor for the Introduction to Teaching and Learning course, I developed the idea to have my class prepare for and teach in a rural school that I knew would provide support and encourage preservice teachers. The plan was to transport thirty university undergraduate students from the Introduction to Teaching and Learning class to McHenry for a full day teaching experience. The university students would benefit from an opportunity to bridge theory with practice and to undertake the role of the teacher in a rural public school setting. The students would gain from first-hand contact with children and from preliminary insights into the culture of at least one rural school.

This school of eighty children* had one class each of kindergarten through fourth grade and a combined class of fifth and sixth graders. There were six teachers and a teaching principal who taught in the afternoon in the combined fifth and sixth grade. In the afternoons the kindergarten teacher was the Chapter I teacher, and the fifth and sixth grade teacher was the physical education teacher and coach. There were other itinerant specialists who worked in the school on a daily basis. The school staff consisted of a business manager, custodian, and cook. The superintendent's office was housed in the building.

* Past tense is used in this passage because of a consolidation process which took place at the end of the school year in 1991. Glenfield-Sutton-McHenry Elementary School consolidated with Grace City and Binford Elementary Schools becoming MidKota.

Preparing for the Visit

To prepare for this experience, groups of university students collaborated with the classroom teachers in preparing the schedule for the day. Teachers suggested that the students consider literature-based classroom themes, particular information, skills and concepts, materials, transitional activities, physical environment, and management procedures.

The McHenry teachers determined a theme for the day, The Environment. The university students created class themes which were related to the school theme and the academic expectations suggested by the teachers:

Kindergarten: Crossing the Bridge to Nature
First Grade: Wonderful World of Weather
Second Grade: Happy Homey Habitat
Third Grade: *Keepers of the Earth*
Fourth Grade: Amazing Animals of *Animalia*
Fifth/Sixth Grade: Marvelous Earth Saving Strategies (MESS)

Content and skills relevant to each class were integrated into the curriculum. To provide a richer picture of the school, I shared (during class sessions with my students) materials, children's work, and information about the school and classroom routines. Photographs of the school, classrooms, materials, children, and the community were also provided. Further, the university students had the freedom to introduce their own ideas, materials, and methods in planning instruction and management. The students planned learning activities based on children's strengths and concerns. The students were able to learn about the children through letters and telephone calls to the teachers.

University students were assigned to classrooms in cooperative groups of four or five members. Prior to the full day of teaching, classroom teachers and university students corresponded. University students sent materials and asked questions. Teachers responded to questions, sent children's work, and offered ideas. Teachers and students collaborated in preparing schedules, themes, skills and concepts to be taught, and materials. Together they assessed children's work and discussed academic strengths and needs of individual children as well as children's health and social concerns. Based on information from the teachers, students designed classroom behavior procedures and the physical environment to accommodate learning situations. The university students were allowed to try out a variety of methods, techniques, and approaches: cooperative learning, learning centers, active learning, interactive techniques, and interdisciplinary methods. The teachers and students planned learning activities which were relevant to skills and concepts currently being taught in each classroom. The rural teachers' willingness to work with the university students on an ongoing basis gave the students some insight into the importance of knowing and understanding the children they were teaching.

In preparation for the project, the university students wrote lesson plans for each anticipated learning activity. To connect the activities for the day they wrote "scripts" to

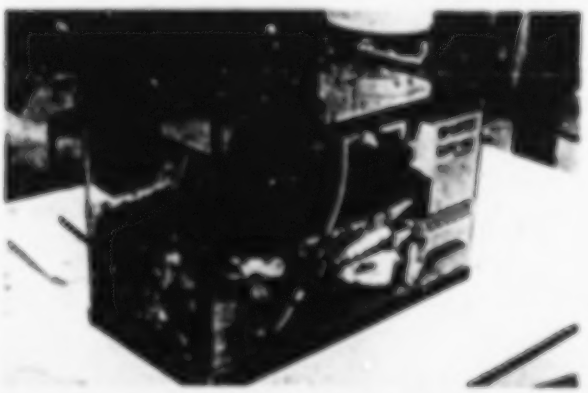
anticipate movement that continues throughout the day. This type of planning gave them the confidence to adapt and modify events during the day. In fact, making adaptations was one of the aspects of teaching they may have learned the most about. Afterward, they did not talk about what was good or bad throughout the day, they talked about how and why they made adjustments in their teaching.

McHenry Day

Learning Cooperatively

Teaching and Observing

Reading With Children



Studying the Problems of Landfills

Learning With Centers

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Debriefing

After reading the university students' narratives and observation papers and listening to them discuss their "adventure," several impressions about learning emerged. First, they gained insight into the complexity of teaching. They realized the many different aspects to consider in developing just one lesson: time, knowing the children, transitions, preparation, having examples children can understand, and being prepared for the unexpected. Second, most of the students related their success and confidence to being prepared. They did a lot of thinking, anticipating, and writing of plans which seemed like a lot of work at the time. However, preparation was the key to their being able to enjoy the day. Third, "adaptations" became a new word in their vocabulary. They understood the plans were needed, but they also became aware they had to be able to make adaptations according to circumstances. Most often their adjustments related to children's academic and social behavior and to time. Finally, they all realized that if they could have interacted with the children before they started their planning, much of the day would have been constructed differently. It was not that the lessons and activities were unsuccessful; it's just that knowledge of children makes planning even better and more effective.

Conclusions

Throughout this project, beginning teacher education students had an opportunity to experience the role of the teacher. They assessed information about children, prepared lesson plans, and implemented learning activities while managing classroom behavior within the framework of a daily schedule. Students also learned to consider how the physical environment and instructional materials affect the outcome of learning activities. Because the McHenry teachers encouraged development of interdisciplinary themes, students learned how to integrate subject areas with needs and interests and with concepts and skills to be learned. This idea was best exemplified in the activities the students developed for teaching math skills by creating story problems from children's literature and children's own stories.

Although the university students were able, on a limited basis, to prepare learning experiences based on children's work, ability, levels, strengths and needs, they were able to gather even more about the children on McHenry Day. As the day unfolded, students were able to adapt their lessons and activities. Three reasons for adaptation being most often mentioned were changes in perception of student abilities, student behavior, and teaching strategies that they had not considered. Not only did they discover how important management is to a successful teaching experience, they also gained insight into how to employ management techniques in their planning. They became aware of how important knowing the children, task, and setting are to creating a positive and successful learning experience.

Evaluation was a key aspect of this experience. The university students were able to observe interactions between teachers and children. This experience provided an opportunity for them to observe and evaluate peers and themselves. Because of simulations, the evaluation format used was not new to the students. They were able to use it with ease and to reflect on alternative ideas and adaptations. The McHenry teachers also gave them written feedback in the form of suggestions and strengths. The students found this valuable and

considered this information along with their own data when analyzing their teaching experiences.

Finally, the examples of different instructional approaches related to holistic/ interactive teaching, literature-based activities, cooperative learning techniques, concept mapping, and independent learning centers provided practice for university students and demonstrations for classroom teachers. Students and teachers were able to circulate and to compare and contrast these different approaches.

Most of the student discerned that this experience enhanced their commitment to teaching. In fact, many cited this event as the most important so far in their deciding to become a teacher.

Jane Ellen Kreitz Dietrich is currently the Director of the Bush Grant Prairie Teachers project and an instructor at the University of North Dakota. She is completing her doctoral degree in elementary teacher education. Previously she taught elementary school in a rural school in Pennsylvania and in Syracuse, NY. After moving to Duluth, MN, she taught in the Elementary Program at the College of St. Scholastica. Most recently she has been an instructor at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. After McHenry, this teaching experience for undergraduates was implemented at other schools in North Dakota in the Prairie Teachers project: Manvel (1991/1992), Kindred (1992), and Davenport (1992).